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AUTHOR Norman, O. Gene
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ABSTRACT

The reference interview is one of the most delicate operations of the reference librarian. This report, which provides a review of the literature, touches on several major topics: (1) conflicts in communication initiated by lack of adequate client knowledge of the depth of the collection and reference tools available, lack of ease in formulating and asking reference questions, and confidence in the reference staff; (2) question negotiation; (3) sensitivity to patron's needs through sensitivity training, counseling techniques, and transactional analysis, and the awareness of body language; (4) skills and techniques necessary for effective performance in today's library; and (5) a basic understanding of the patron's communication needs through courses in sensitivity, communication science and counseling, and awareness of current developments on the subject. The selected, annotated bibliography cites relevant periodical articles and books. (MBR)

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DECIPHERING REFERENCE QUESTIONS THROUGH THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW

O. Gene Norman, Head
Reference Department
Indiana State University Library
Terre Haute, Indiana

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O. Gene Norman

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Reference librarians have been deciphering reference questions in the United States for more than a century. In 1876, Samuel Green, of Worcester, Massachusetts, recommended being pleasant to patrons, gaining their confidence and respect, and mingling with users to help them.[1] Bernard Vavrek notes in a recent article that Green will be remembered for starting reference services in the United States and that many of his ideas are incorporated into the "Information Services Guidelines" which was accepted by the Reference and Adult Services Division of the American Library Association in 1976.[2]

The reference interview which is used in deciphering questions is one of the most delicate operations of reference work. Over thirty years ago, Margaret Hutchins examined the relationship between the reference librarian and the patron, the amount of time required for an interview, the clarification of the question, and the determination of needs of various patrons.[3] She emphasized the need to attend to each of these relationships to avoid making reference work "lopsided." Her goals were to establish a friendly relationship with patrons, to gain their confidence, and to clarify the patron's problem so that his needs could be fulfilled.

Ten years later, Louis Shores published his Basic Reference Sources.[4] In the introductory chapter, he primarily is concerned with the six functions of reference and the classification of questions,[5] but he does devote two pages under the information function on suggestions for answering and analyzing questions.[6]

He recommends listening carefully to the patron, asking the patron pertinent questions, and being courteous and tactful in one's approach. It is in this section that he advises the well-known device of placing something helpful in the patron's hands right away to keep the user occupied while the librarian continues to search for the information needed.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Within the past twelve years, the literature of the reference interview has expressed a special concern for improving communications between the reference librarian and the library user. In 1966, Ellis Mount wrote an article in Special Libraries entitled "Communication Barriers and the Reference Question."[7] In it he identified nine reasons for faulty communication between the reference librarian and the library user, and he offered several suggestions for improving communications. The following reasons which he observed can be recognized as causes for conflict in communication today:

"1. An inquirer lacks knowledge of the depth and quality of the collection.
2. An inquirer lacks knowledge of the reference tools available.
3. An inquirer lacks knowledge of the vocabulary used by a particular set of tools.
4. An inquirer does not willingly reveal his reason for needing the information.
5. An inquirer hasn't decided what he really wants.

6. An inquirer is not at ease in asking his question.
7. An inquirer feels that he cannot reveal the true question because it is of a sensitive nature.
8. An inquirer dislikes reference staff members (or vice versa) and consequently avoids giving a true picture of his needs.
9. An inquirer lacks confidence in the ability of the reference staff."[8]

Seven additional items can be added to Mount's list based upon my experience at the reference desk.

1. The patron misunderstands his instructor or friend or unintentionally is misled by his instructor or friend. Assignments often are given orally which allows students to hear a different assignment than what actually is intended. One example which I recall included an assignment on mercy killing or "euthanasia." One student came to the library asking for material on "Youth in Asia."
2. The patron is inexperienced at stating a problem. The library user occasionally becomes very frustrated and uptight when pinned down by the librarian to state the specific information he needs. His actions often speak louder than his words and seem to say: "Just give me the information I want but don't make me tell you what it is !"
3. The patron, and perhaps the librarian, does not understand the problem. This often is true of students looking for technical information in such areas as medicine and law where terminology may need to be defined in lay terms.

A subject dictionary, encyclopedia, or handbook may assist the patron and the librarian in further defining the problem.

4. The patron sees the problem in terms that are too general. He may ask for material on taxes but what he really wants is information dealing with deductions for federal income taxes.
5. The patron does not understand the system of locating information. One case which I recall involved a student who asked very knowingly for Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory only to discover that it did not index articles in magazines but just listed periodical titles for specific subject areas.
6. The patron has only part of a question. He may have an incomplete reference to a book, an article, a legal case, a name, or an address. One example which I recently encountered was a request for "Title IX." Of all the "Title IX's" available from the federal statutes since Congress' first session, this request turned out to be "Title IX" of the federal law prohibiting discrimination by sex in education in the "Education Amendments of 1972."
7. The patron is doing work for someone else. I never cease to be amazed at the number of persons who can talk others into doing their work for them. A mother will come to the library to find information for her son's sixth grade assignment. A girl friend or boy friend will search for material for a paper being written by the other interested

party. And a pledge in a college fraternity has been known to locate material, and perhaps even write papers, for his active brothers. Quite often, this proxy patron does not know the answer to the first question asked by the reference librarian and often has to contact the real patron before continuing his search.

In an 1968 article in College & Research Libraries, the negotiation of reference questions by special librarians and information specialists is surveyed by Robert Taylor.[9] This article is one of the best investigations dealing with question negotiation, and it frequently is cited by later writers on the topic. The author outlines four levels of question formation:

"Q1 - the actual, but unexpressed need for information (the visceral need);

Q2 - the conscious, within-brain description of the need (the conscious need);

Q3 - the formal statement of the need (the formalized need);

Q4 - the question as presented to the information system (the compromised need)."[10]

Although reference librarians may not deal with each of these levels for every patron, most will recognize having dealt with all levels, at one time or another, with a variety of patrons.

From his survey, Taylor discovered that generally questions pass through five filters:

"1. determination of subject;

2. objective and motivation;

3. personal characteristics of inquirer;

4. relationship of inquiry description to file organization;

5. anticipated or acceptable answers."[11]

At many a busy reference desk, it is entirely possible that reference librarians frequently do not progress beyond the first filter of determining the topic needed by the inquirer. However, the chances are greater that library patrons would find reference service more satisfactory if the librarian would make a special effort to determine the user's needs more exactly by asking a few skillful and tactful questions related to the last four filters.

Every library school student is familiar with William Katz's Introduction to Reference Work which addresses the basic elements of the reference interview.[12] Unlike Hutchins and Shores, Katz concerns himself with personal considerations for helping the user such as opening the interview with a few pleasantries to make the patron feel at ease and admitting one's lack of knowledge of a topic. Katz suggests several ways in which reference librarians can improve their reference interview including additional training and possibly some changes in personality and work traits.

Since 1970, there appears to be a move to utilize in the reference interview techniques and methods from communication sciences. King suggests that librarians apply interviewing techniques using "open questions" which cannot be answered "yes" or "no",[13] and Penland describes how to perform an effective interview using communication theory.[14] He stresses that the librarian should spend more time listening to the patron than talking.

Murphy observed that very few libraries provide librarians with on-the-job training programs on interviewing or interpersonal relations and that many librarians could improve their interview by learning and practicing better interviewing techniques.[15] To assist librarians in this effort, nine graduate library schools at the following universities offer separate courses in communication skills: State University of New York at Buffalo; University of Pittsburgh; Simmons College, Boston; Syracuse University; University of Kentucky; Wayne State University; University of Oklahoma; University of Denver; and University of Totonto.[16] In addition, many universities have pertinent courses in communications in such areas as speech, business and psychology.

SENSITIVITY

Being sensitive to the needs of patrons has been another concern of reference librarians during the past few years. In 1971, Pritchard itemized eighteen problems with which librarians deal in an attempt to make librarians more sensitive to their feelings and the feelings of users.[17] Three years later, Tibbets wrote an article in Special Libraries urging librarians to be sensitive to the needs of patrons, to work with the whole individual and not just the questions he might ask, and to become acquainted with the techniques of sensitivity training.[18]

In a reply to this article, Smith and Fitt suggest the horizontal relationship as an alternative to sensitivity training.[19] They argue that sensitivity training requires professional instruction and is limited in its application. By using the horizontal

relationship technique, all patrons are accepted on the same plane regardless of name, sex, occupation, rank, nationality or economic status. The vertical relationship, which should be avoided, contrasts with the horizontal relationship in that the librarian may be condescending, non-cooperative, and act as if he is being bothered by the patron.

BODY LANGUAGE

If librarians are to work with the whole patron, they need to become better acquainted with body language in order to determine user's needs more accurately. It has been noted by Boucher that eye contact usually comes before a conversation and that expressions around the eyes and the mouth especially are important just prior to and during an interview.[20] In other words, a patron will be more receptive to a pleasant smile than to a questionable frown.

An article in the Spring, 1977, issue of RQ discusses the importance of such factors as physical distance, physical appearance, posture, gestures and head nods.[21] The librarian often can improve communication with the library user by discussing the patron's needs at a comfortable distance near the patron, by maintaining physical attractiveness through good grooming and acceptable dress, by keeping a relaxed but erect posture, and by using occasional pertinent gestures to help illustrate his point. A professor in one midwestern university has gone on record that he will give an automatic A to a student who sits in his class,

folds his hands, and nods in agreement with him. Librarians using a similar technique might have an equally positive effect upon the patrons they serve.

COUNSELING TECHNIQUES

In 1970, Penland recognized the need for librarians who deal with patrons to be instructed in counseling techniques,[22] and five years later, Peck identified the similarities of counseling and reference work.[23] The counselor is involved with emotional and personal problems of his client; whereas, the librarian deals with locating information for the patron. Both are concerned with the importance of initial contacts with individuals seeking help, and each profession requires an effective interview. Counselors and librarians recognize the need to be aware of such areas as empathy, nonverbal behavior, and listening. The Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh is one of the few which offers courses in counselor and helping relationships skills.[24]

Librarians interested in counseling techniques also might be interested in an article in the April, 1977, issue of the Ohio Library Association Bulletin which reviews ways in which transactional analysis can be applied to the reference interview.[25] Use of natural feelings of warmth, tenderness and closeness are emphasized, but the author recommends that librarians interested in using transactional analys's should first familiarize themselves with the literature on the topic.

SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES NEEDED TODAY

The question that a practicing reference librarian might ask today is: "What skills and techniques are necessary to perform the most effective reference interview?" Every librarian's shopping list probably would vary, but establishing a favorable relationship with the patron so that he will express his problem freely with the reference librarian seems essential. This often can be done simply by a friendly greeting which indicates that the librarian is human. Recent research has shown that the patron receives more satisfaction at the reference desk when the librarian's verbal or nonverbal response to his presence is immediate.[26]

Following this initial contact, the librarian should show an increased awareness of the patron and his problem. The librarian may continue the interview by asking direct questions which allow the patron to expand his thoughts and to discuss his problem freely. To interpret the patron's needs accurately, the librarian must listen carefully to him and observe his actions and gestures. If he winces or frowns, he probably will need additional help. The librarian must show the patron that he is genuinely interested in the patron's problem and that he intends to do all he can to resolve it. After finding the information requested by the patron, the librarian may need to follow up with him later to make sure that the material met his needs.

UNDERSTANDING PATRON'S COMMUNICATION NEEDS

The reference librarian can improve his understanding of the patron's communication needs, and therefore the reference interview, by one or more of the following actions:

1. taking courses and attending seminars or institutes in such areas as communication science, counseling, and sensitivity training;
2. reading books and articles and absorbing A-V materials dealing with interviewing, listening and interpersonal communications;
3. videotaping himself during the reference interview for self-evaluation later; and
4. doing research himself in any area of interest.

This last action will give the reference librarian an opportunity to see the library as the layperson sees it. In the process, he may find the library, and perhaps some of the librarians, somewhat intimidating. If so, he can concentrate his efforts to correct this situation. Finally, we might join the author of a 1969 article in Special Libraries by asking:

> "If we traded roles with our customers, would we seek out and welcome the assistance of librarians like ourselves?"[27]

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DECIPHERING REFERENCE QUESTIONS THROUGH THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW: An Annotated Bibliography

Compiled by

O. Gene Norman, Head
Reference Department
Indiana State University Library

Indiana Library Association, District V Meeting
Terre Haute, Indiana
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Boucher, Virginia. "Nonverbal Communication and the Library Reference Interview," RQ 16:27-32, Fall, 1976.

This paper primarily is concerned with exploring body movement as a source of communication in the reference interview.

Crum, Norman J. "Customer Relationship: Dynamics of Filling Requests for information," Special Libraries 60:269-277, May-June, 1969.

Examines various stages of customer questions and barriers which exist between librarian and customer. Suggests various ways of eliminating barriers.

Donovan, William A. "Seemingly Unjustified Complaints Repay a Second Look," RQ 8:265-276, Summer, 1969.

Discusses reference transactions with the reference librarian in a role ranging from dominance to submission. Notes that patrons do not always know what they want even when they request a title of a specific book.

Gothberg, Helen M. "Communication Patterns In Library Reference and Information Service," RQ 13:7-14, Fall, 1973.

States that negotiation of the reference question is one of the major communication problems in libraries. Notes the importance of having librarians study communication sciences.

Gothberg, Helen M. "Immediacy: A Study of Communication Effect on the Reference Process," Journal of Academic Librarianship 2:126-129, July, 1976.

The author discovers that library users express more satisfaction with the reference interview when the reference librarian responds immediately to a patron, either verbally or nonverbally.

Howell, Benita J. and others. "Fleeting Encounters-- A Role Analysis of Reference Librarian-Patron Interaction," RQ 16:124-129, Winter, 1976.

Presents research conducted by three scholars in anthropology at a university library to determine the patron's and reference librarian's satisfaction with the reference service provided.

Hutchins, Margaret. "The Reference Interview," in Introduction to Reference Work, pp.2[illegible]. Chicago: American Library Association, 1944.

A standard essay on the topic. Reviews the relationship between the librarian and patron, the time needed for an interview, the question negotiation, and the needs of various types of patrons.

Katz, William A. "The Reference Interview," in Introduction to Reference Work, pp.69-97, v.2, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

A detailed discussion of the reference interview and the steps in the negotiation process which especially is useful for the beginning reference librarian. Katz itemizes several personal considerations to keep in mind during the interview and concludes that most reference librarians can improve.

King, Geraldine B. "The Reference Interview," RQ 12:157-160, Winter, 1972.

Stresses the need for librarians to apply interviewing techniques. Suggests using "open questions" where the response is left up to the patron rather than "closed questions" where the patron has little, or no, choice in his response.

Maxwell, Margaret. "The Machine in the Reference Room," RQ 11:23-25, Fall, 1971.

Discusses how reference librarians answer reference questions and considers the possible use of automation for this purpose in the future.

Mount, Ellis. "Communication Barriers and the Reference Question," Special Libraries 57:575-578, October, 1966.

The author cites 9 reasons why the patron has difficulty communicating with the librarian and he makes suggestions for improving the patron/librarian relationship.

Mucci, Judith. "Videotape Self-Evaluation in Public Libraries: Experiments in Evaluating Public Service," RQ 16:33-37, Fall, 1976.

Reports an experiment in the Orlando Public Library where reference librarians voluntarily were videotaped during reference interviews. Afterwards, the videotapes were used for self-evaluation and were useful in allowing the librarians to see their physical reactions and to examine the questions asked patrons.

Munoz, Joanna L. "Significance of Nonverbal Communication in the Reference Interview," RQ 16:220-224, Spring, 1977.

Stresses the importance of nonverbal communication as it relates to the reference interview. Such factors as facial expressions, gestures, postures, physical distance, physical appearance, and head nods are considered.

Murphy, Marcy and Nilon, Nancy M. "Reference/Advisory Interview: Its Contribution to Library-User Education," in Educating the Library User, pp.287-306. Edited by John Lubans, Jr. New York: Bowker, 1974.

Recognizes the need for interviewing and communication skills when dealing with the patron. The author feels that communication skills can be improved with instruction.

Peck, Theodore P. "Counseling Skills Applied to Reference Services," RQ 14:233-235, Spring, 1975.

Relates the similarities of counseling and reference work. Items discussed include the librarian's ability to have empathy with the patron, to be attentive to the patron in appearance and in gestures, and to listen closely to the patron.

Penland, Patrick. "Interview as Communication," Library Occurrent 24:422-424, May, 1974.

Describes how to perform an effective reference interview using communication theory. Recommends that the patron be allowed to do most of the talking and that the librarian concentrate on listening to and observing the patron.

Penland, Patrick. Interviewing for Counselor and Reference Librarians. Bethesda, Md.: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 049 801, 1970.

Interviewing is discussed as a "disciplined encounter technique." The librarian is encouraged to allow the patron to discuss his needs and interests and to not rush to the books too quickly.

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One of the few studies located which deal with the problems of the reference interview and the high school student. The author states that "to want to help and to try to establish a rapport with the young person" are the main requirements for an effective interview.

Smith, Nathan M. and Fitt, Stephen D. "Vertical-horizontal Relationships," Special Libraries 66:528-531, November, 1975.

Presents the horizontal relationship approach as an alternative to sensitivity training for librarians. The horizontal relationship is described as a "positive, non-threatening, interpersonal relationship;" whereas, the vertical relationship is characterized by a failure to understand and cooperate with the patron.

Taylor, Robert S. "Question-Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries," College & Research Libraries 29:178-194, May, 1968.

Discusses and analyzes the negotiation of reference questions by special librarians and information specialists. Notes four levels of question formation and enumerates five filters through which a question passes. Still considered one of the best investigations dealing with question-negotiation.

Tibbets, Pamela, "Sensitivity Training--A Possible Application For Librarians," Special Libraries 65:493-498, December, 1974.

Emphasizes the need for librarians to be sensitive to the needs of patrons. Encourages librarians to become acquainted with the techniques and goals of sensitivity training.